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Kansas City, Missouri 64111

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Frank Higgins • Eating Blowfish Raindust Press

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Haiku

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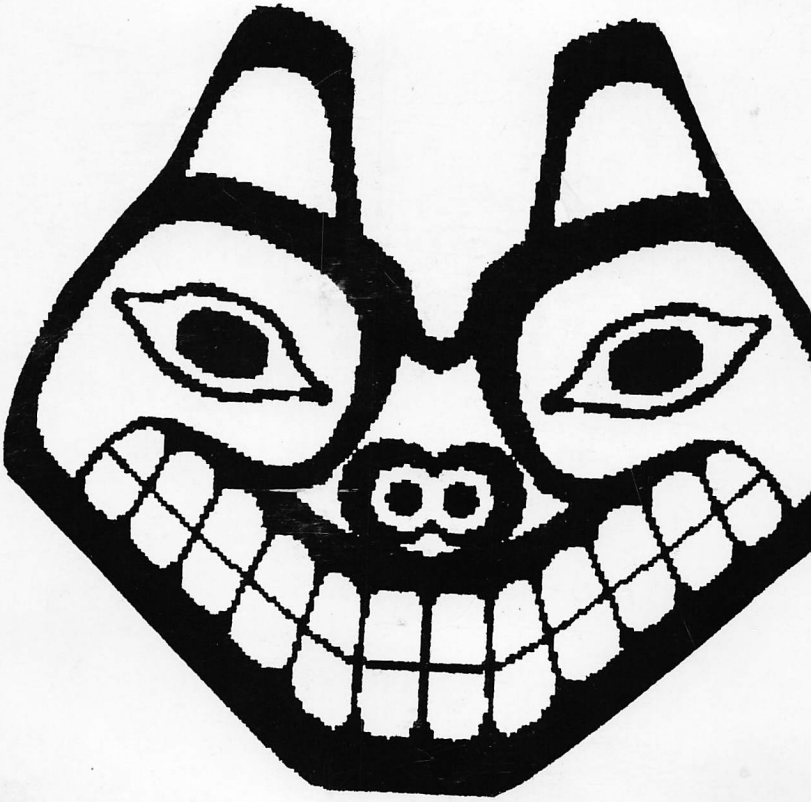

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Some of the haiku published in this collection appeared previously in the magazines *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, and *New Letters*.

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The Dodge City Gas Station Attendant Test for Haiku

When my old Chevrolet station wagon needed some spot painting many years ago, I decided to cover the car with haiku. This might not raise eyebrows in Berkeley, but in parts of the Midwest at that time it was walking on the wild side.

During a stop I made for gas in Dodge City, Kansas, the station attendant came out to get a closer look at the car. "What is all this stuff?" he said. "CB sh--?"

When I explained that it was haiku from 17th century Japan, he looked at me as if I had said that I was from Neptune. Then he read the haiku near the gas tank by Matsuo Basho:

summer grass—
all that remains
of the warrior's dreams

He grunted. "I fought at Okinawa," he said. He looked at the haiku again, grunted, and said, "That thing's true."

While putting together the haiku for this collection, I've tried to use that grunt as my guide.

Frank Higgins

After Eating Blowfish

numbness leaves my tongue—
I realize I'd been numb
for years

snagged by the bear,
the salmon's wound
leaks eggs

past the gorging gulls,
more baby turtles
hurry to the sea

storm--the sparrow
flies to the statue
to clutch the rifle's stillness

Hiroshima

from broken clay bricks
wildflower seeds
beginning to sprout

at the tank's blast
the meadow bursts
with butterflies

hearing the wren,
the old woman sews its song
into her quilt

that time of the month—
the cellist turns her menstrual flow
into music

a blizzard of birds:
it's white even between
the snow geese

✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣

Summer In New York

rush hour subway—
the only distance
is in our faces

ghetto sidewalk—
the murder victim's outline
divided for hopscotch

tenement windows—
dark faces fanning themselves
above red geraniums

just a sprinkle,
suddenly Central Park has frogs
trying for Carnegie Hall

57th and 5th—
enough open umbrellas
the street smells of silk

under an awning
a sax man jams
with the thunderstorm

children in single file
through the puddle
again

dodging taxis and trucks,
a bird takes a bath
in a pothole

the gospel song ends—
the voices keep coming
out of the flowers

happy to catch it,
the boy now cries when he sees
the cleaning of the trout

Autumn in the Berkshires

(for Blythe Danner)

leaf-watching trip—
swerving the car all day
around caterpillars

trying and failing
to blow the leaves off too soon,
the wind makes music

twilight—
the mountains give up their colors
to the sunset

atop the tree
the porcupine looks over
the white forest

seeing danger,
the snowshoe hare closes its eyes
and disappears

Not Over The Divorce

at the antique sale
smiling at bargains she'd like
and won't know about

unable to sleep,
I start rehashing wrongs
from years ago
        the moonlight moves
        across the room

✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣

Kansas

through the Flint Hills
though the wind's stopped
the trees still leaning

lying in the shadow
of the satellite dish
cows

a summer cloud—
sunshine and hailstones
all at once

the tornado starts
with the moths swirling
around the streetlight

left against the shed,
the whipping stick
begins to bud

sunset fades—
the sky and the cow's mooing
darken

its mate shot down,
the lone goose circles—
the silence between the cries

finally a kill,
the hunter warms his hands
with the pheasant

as the logs turn white,
the hunters' lies die out
around the campfire

their orangeness
taking back the field from fog—
pumpkins

convent grounds—
among the silent nuns
cicadas sounding off

their stomachs full,
the wolves go to sleep
around the moose

inside the remains
of the moose's ribcage,
the raven eats its way out

a patch of red snow—
frozen on the dead wolf's teeth
bits of strawberries

Africa

the whole garden cropped—
they came so silently
elephants

at the last second
the breeze in the grass
becomes a lion

now that the lion
has brought one down, the zebras
bow their heads and eat

a cooling wind—
the lizard on the yucca
disappears in green

bursting brightly,
the fireworks fall away—
stars

so quietly
the praying mantis devours
the bee's ferocious face

✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣ ✣

San Francisco

watching seagulls,
I feel the weight
in my shoes

Chinatown fish mart—
fillets so fresh
the red spots pulse

low tide—
as his shell collection scatters
the boy yells, "Behave!"

so quiet—
fog closes down the city
without stirring the wind chimes

that cooking through the fog:
Chinese? Italian? French?
Russian? Mexican? Basque.

incoming tide—
old men watching it
with folded arms

after the earthquake,
the stars brighter
above the dark city

without a sound,
the eels' mating dance
becomes a sparkle

learning the duck's name,
marks, calls, habits—nothing's left:
but everything

winning too much,
the retarded brother glares
over the checkerboard

surprised to be pregnant,
the girl thought she was nothing
but skin and bones

psychiatric ward—
rising above the Muzak
a long cry

Vietnam

outside the hut,
an old woman stirs rice
with a bayonet

blackening our faces
to kill by moonlight,
word comes we're walking on the moon

as the vet sits,
his nephews fight for turns
to use his crutches

killing the fly—
now the room becomes
too quiet

hearing the chirp,
the kitten's eyes
narrow

scaring the child:
the rotting jack-o-lantern
full of maggots

visiting his parent's grave,
the young man now takes care
to step around others

autumn vineyard—
among the lush grapes
the lovers hold hands

stopping rowing to kiss,
the lovers float downstream
with the red leaves

listening to Mozart—
the music flows in color
from the teabag

after Beethoven's 9th,
restless for someone
to live my life with

stiff
beside the dancing nudes:
the museum guard

October sunrise—
the frozen reed
drips green

still winter—
but deep under the ice
the river sounds off

almost spring—
the pantry shelves full
with empty mason jars

Montana

saddle store—
the cowboys speak
as though in church

their antlers locked,
the starving elk
fight from their knees

hearing the coyote howl,
the dog turns to his master
and growls

winter woods—
everything's white but the wolf's paw
left in the trap

a beak-sized bite
of wing missing,
the monarch hurries on

✤ ✤ ✤ ✤ ✤ ✤ ✤

Death in the Family

listening to grandpa's tales
of being a boilermaker,
I spoonfeed him baby food

from his deathbed
grandpa hears his girls
fighting for china

after he's gone,
his girls cry over the indent
in his pillow

his clothes in a bag—
they weighed the same
when he was in them

at the funeral
old women swapping pictures
of grandkids

graveside prayer—
bees bury themselves
in the flowers

in the passing caboose
Christmas lights —
the night gets colder

a lump in her breast,
my mother shows me
how to fry eggs

guiding the woman
who helped me learn to walk
as she takes baby steps

On His Way To Be Put To Sleep

my old dog struggles
to put his head
out the window

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